

# Misconstructing Characters: A Critical Look at the Translation of the Swearing Words

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## Abstract

Translating swearing words has become an interesting study to conduct, especially because it involves two different languages that carry different social values. One language might be rich of such words that are considered as taboos, in this case swearing words, others might restrict the use of swearing words. This might create a problem when the swearing words are used as parts of the characterization of a character in a story. As one of the traits, swearing words should be translated as close as possible in order not to distort the character's quality. This is the task of the translator not to misconstrue the characters in the text s/he translates. This study explores character shift such character distortion due to the translation of swearing words in subtitle translation of a movie, "Suicide Squad" in Indonesian context.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual translation, character, swearing words

## Introduction

Translation, in any forms, always deals with two different languages with different cultural contexts. Knowledge transfer as well as entertainment industry owes the hands of translation. One example is movie industry. Movie producers need subtitle to expand their markets. Unfortunately, this need is not supported by the effort to consider how the subtitle is translated. It is reported by Chen (2004) in the article "Linguistic Dimensions of Subtitling. Perspective from Taiwan". Chen argues that in Taiwan context, although this need is highly demanded, it is not supported by good qualities of subtitle. It is said that the low quality is due to several factors: movie piracy, uncontrolled subtitling projects, economical problem, and also linguistics problem.

The low quality of subtitle affects the movie comprehension. Kapsaskis (2008) conducted research which shows that subtitle has the potential to cover the "real" reality. In the research, Kapsaskis says that there is something foreign that is carried by the movie for the audience to enjoy. The audience cannot enjoy the foreign substance without translation. It shows the importance of authority to decide which is translated and which one is not translated.

Translating subtitle has its own challenges apart from finding the word equivalent in a certain language in translation process. The subtitle translator has to pay attention to the standards and characters limitation in each frame, it has to be synchronized with the audio visual from the movie. This made the subtitle translation must be short and clear, limited to two lines.

Considering authority, it should be done under consideration since the effect of the decision might influence the message the movies carries. For example, when euphemism or even words deletion are applied to the subtitle translation due to censorship, surely there is something missing or distorted from the original version. Moreover, Kapsaskis also says that subtitle is considered as supplement to the language in the movie. He also found that there is a process of 'defamiliarizing' or commonly known as a process of depicting something uncommon in a certain culture.

In his article, Chen gives example that swearing words in the movie *The Negotiator* were deleted or softened, more if spoken by female characters. The authority in Taiwan decides the things that are appropriate for people in Taiwan, for example words containing private parts of body are deleted from the subtitle.

Some researches on translating taboo words and swear words are found. Robati and Zand (2018) in their article say that in translating taboo words, translators should think about the strategy in finding the equivalent in target text. Rull et al. (2016) also conducted research on translating taboo words, but in this article movie subtitle was used. The study was conducted under the context of translating English subtitle into Malay. This article also explains that words related to sexual and swearing were deleted. Similar study was also conducted by Cabrera (2016) taking the context of translating movie subtitle from English into Spanish.

Although some researches were done on subtitling, especially on the translation of swearing words, still this study is worth conducted. Taking different context, the study on swearing words translation might lead to different result since each language carries different culture. The study can also lead to the effect of the translation techniques used. The previous studies only focused on whether the swearing words were translated or deleted, neglecting its effect to the depiction of the characters in the movie. This article explores the translation of the swearing words spoken by the characters in "*Suicide Squad*" (2016) and its effect to the (mis)construction of characters in Indonesian context.

### **Theory and Method**

The form of English swearing words can be in words and phrases, covering nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Swearing words falls under one subcategory in of offensive and taboo language. According to taxonomy of offensive and taboo language proposed by Avila-Cabrera (2016), swearing words falls under category of offensive language that consists of three subcategories: abusive swearwords, expletives, and invectives. Abusive swearwords include cursing ('Goddamn you!'), derogatory tone ('I'm sick of fucking hearing it'), insult ('a real fucking animal'), and oath ('I swear on my mother's eternal soul'). Expletives includes exclamatory swearwords ('Holy shit!'), while invectives include subtle insult ('It's the one job basically any woman can get') (29).

In the characterization of characters in a story, swearing words can be a tool to help the author portray the characters. The use of swearing words is identical to a certain type person. It also represents feeling and emotion of the characters. Using the swearing words, the author can add flavor to the characters that is about to build and bring the characters into life. Since the use of swearing words is common in a certain group of society. Thus, if it is related to translation, swearing words should be considered important to translate.

According to Davoodi (2009), there are four strategies in translating offensive and taboo language, which in this article referred to translation technique. The first is censorship or commonly known as deletion/omission, using this technique, the words are omitted or not translated into the target language. Second is substituting the taboo word with another word in the target text, this way of translating might distort the meaning. Third, taboo for taboo; that is finding the taboo word in the target text that has the similar meaning to the taboo word in the source language. The last is euphemism; it is translating the taboo word into a word or expression that is more accepted or less offensive in the target language.

The data were taken from the subtitle of the movie "*Suicide Squad*". Focusing on the dialogue between the characters, swearing words were identified in the English subtitle. After the swearing words found, then they were located in the Indonesian subtitle of the movie. Watching the movie was the next step to find out who said that swearing words.

Finally, the shifts were analyzed to see their effect to the characterization as well as the technique used in translating the swearing words.

“Suicide Squad” is a movie which characters are criminals, super villains, put in high risk jails due to their bad records. They were assembled together by the US government to serve as the country protectors since Superman was dead. It is rated PG 13+ in United States, and 17+ in Indonesia, due to the violence and profanity used in the movie. This movie won Oscar in 2017 under category of best achievement in makeup and hair styling, and 16 other awards; it was also nominated in 37 nominations of various awards.

The English subtitle was downloaded from the subtitle provided in [https://opensubtitles.co/download-subtitle/Suicide-Squad-2016\\_86242](https://opensubtitles.co/download-subtitle/Suicide-Squad-2016_86242), while the Indonesian translation was taken from the subtitle translation done by fans-up, *lebah ganteng* that can be retrieved from [https://opensubtitles.co/download-subtitle/Suicide-Squad-2016\\_85676](https://opensubtitles.co/download-subtitle/Suicide-Squad-2016_85676). *Lebah ganteng* is a quite productive in subtitling translation.

### Findings and Discussion

Since “Suicide Squad” is a movie about a gang of criminals who were gathered to fight the enemy of the US, it contains swearing words. Although rated PG-13 in the US, the use of some swearing words are quite many. Approximately there are 50 words ‘shit’ found in the movie, both the stand alone word and embedded one. The reason of using the words in the movie for teenagers is probably because the movie would like to depict the real condition in the society.

Analyzed using the category mentioned above, the swearing words found in the “Suicide Squad” are included as abusive swear words and expletives. For better understanding, the examples taken from the movie are being presented in the following table.

Table 1: The category of swearing words found in “Suicide Squad”

Category	Subcategory	Types	Examples
Offensive	Abusive Swearwords	Cursing	‘You son of a bitch!’
		Derogatory tone	‘But I’m concerned ‘cause I don’t see nobody writing shit down.’
		Insult	‘But her stank-ass boyfriend can’t come.’
	Expletives	Exclamatory Swearwords	‘Shit!’

From the data obtained, it is found that only four types of offensive language used in the movie. Not all of the swearing words found were translated into Indonesian. There was a kind of patterns of the translation techniques used. The pattern is that when the swearing words stand alone, they are translated either using taboo for taboo technique or euphemism. For example, the word ‘bitch’ was translated into ‘bangsat’. Meanwhile, when the swearing words were used together with other phrases, they are mostly deleted or censored, thus making the the translated versions of the phrases were not categorized as having taboo words anymore. For instance, the phrase ‘she ain’t do shit to me’ was translated into ‘dia tak punya salah padaku’, where the word ‘shit’ was censored. The example of the phenomena can be seen in the following table.



Table 2. Example of translation technique applied in “Suicide Squad” Subtitle translation


English version	Indonesian version	Back to back Translation	Translation technique
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(21) 00:02:01,040 --> 00:02:02,678 Open the goddamn gate!	(27) 00:02:01,159 --> 00:02:02,762 Buka pintunya!	Open the door!	Censorship/ deletion
(89) 00:06:26,960 --> 00:06:29,554 Now double it for being a dickhead.	(103) 00:06:27,173 --> 00:06:28,644 Gandakan karena kau menyebalkan.	Double it because you resent me.	Euphemism
(381) 00:27:40,320 --> 00:27:41,514 Shit!	(412) 00:27:41,562 --> 00:27:42,706 Sial!	Shit!	Taboo for taboo

The swearing words are used not without a purpose. One of which is to show a specific trait of a character. In this movie, the characters were villains who were commonly viewed as impolite people. This depiction was proven by the excessive use of the swearing words in their dialogues.

Table 3. Samples of villain characters swearing words

Frame	English Subtitle	Character
	(537) 00:39:39,560 --> 00:39:41,915 Oh, you deaf. You one of them <b>deaf hoes</b> .	Deadshot
	(729) 00:54:29,280 --> 00:54:31,794 Always. What about the <b>shit</b> in our necks?	Harley Quinn

	<p>(751) 00:55:46,680 --&gt; 00:55:47,908 Come on, do the <b>bastard</b>.</p>	<p>Captain Boomerang</p>
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Another purpose of using swearing words is to create a contrastive effect related to the character's traits, their actions, values, and important decisions. Gathered as a special troop to protect the US, the criminals agreed to do it because they wanted to have their freedom. Later, it was told that they had to come to decision to run away from their duty or to fight for their country, the country which imprisoned their freedom. Surprisingly, the villains fought side by side to save the people from an evil who was depicted as a beautiful lady with a powerful mystical power.

When the Indonesian subtitle of the movie is scrutinized, it is found that not all of swearing words found were translated. Although the movie is rated suitable for teenagers above 17, still the swearing words were 'censored'. There is a pattern discovered in the translation of swearing words in the Indonesian subtitle. When the swearing word stands alone, it was translated, but when it was used as a phrase together with other words, such as 'writing-shit', it was not translated. Deadshot used this word a lot, but in the Indonesian translation, some were deleted and some were softened. Below are the samples taken from the movie subtitle, table 4 is sample of the taboo for taboo, while table 5 is sample for censorship.

Table 4. Sample of taboo for taboo


Frame	English Subtitle	Indonesian Subtitle	Back to back Translation	Offensive language category
	<p>(1178) 01:34:20,560 - -&gt; 01:34:22,198 Bitch, I'm having a drink.</p>	<p>(1277) 01:34:20,646 - -&gt; 01:34:22,841 Bangsat, aku sedang minum.</p>	<p>Scoundrel, I am having a drink.</p>	<p>Cursing</p>

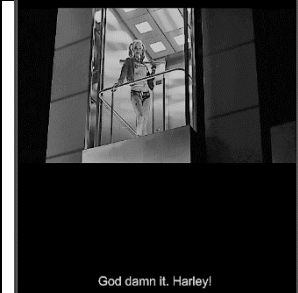
Table 5. Sample of the censorship

Frame	English Subtitle	Indonesian Subtitle	Back to back Translation	Offensive language category
	(419) 00:30:00,360 - -> 00:30:03,511 But I'm concerned 'cause I don't see nobody writing shit down.	(457) 00:30:00,509 - -> 00:30:04,249 Tapi aku ragu karena tak ada yang menuliskannya.	But I am not sure since nobody is writing it.	Derogatory tone
	(625) 00:46:05,360 - -> 00:46:07,999 Triangle, bitch. Study.	(708) 00:46:05,497 - -> 00:46:08,864 Sistem Triangle. Belajarlah.	Triangle system. Learn.	Cursing

In the phrase 'writing-shit', the word 'shit' is used to give emphasize to the importance of the act of writing in that scene, but it was deleted, so there was no emphasize employed. It means that the purpose of using the word is not achieved in the target language. This also reduces the strong characteristic of Deadshot when saying the utterance.

Table 6. Sample of the euphemism

Frame	English Subtitle	Indonesian Subtitle	Back to back Translation	Offensive language category
	(1069) 01:22:59,560 --> 01:23:01,437 She ain't do shit to me.	(1168) 01:22:59,922 - -> 01:23:01,856 Dia tak punya salah padaku.	She doesn't have fault on me.	Derogatory tone

	<p>(944) 01:10:56,840 --&gt; 01:10:58,353 God damn it. Harley!</p>	<p>(1031) 01:10:57,087 - -&gt; 01:10:59,071 Astaga, Harley !</p>	<p>For heaven's sake, Harley!</p>	<p>Cursing</p>
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In the expression of 'She ain't do shit to me', the word 'shit' was used to replace the word 'bad thing', it can be seen that it was softened and translated into "hal buruk" (back to back translation to English "bad thing"). The result of the euphemism applied is the less strong (weaken) of the utterance meaning as well as weakening the characteristics of Deadshot.

Out of 60 taboo words found, 35% were translated while the rest were either softened or even deleted. The softening and deletion of the swearing words result in the distortion of the character's trait in the translation version. The aim carries by the original version is not achieved in the Indonesian version. The traits of the villain characters are softened, they are not as fierce as in the original version. Moreover, the second aim to create the contrastive effect between villain characters versus good characters; and villain characters versus their action is also not reached.

Thus if the Indonesian version of the movie subtitle is evaluated, the accuracy is not completely achieved. The censorship and euphemism applied in the subtitle translation is perhaps due to the urgency to make the subtitle accepted in the Indonesian culture. In Indonesian culture, like other cultures in Asia, swearing is considered offensive and taboo, thus censorship of a foreign product is a common view.

This study confirms the use of taboo words translation strategies proposed by Davoodi which are taboo for taboo, euphemism, censorship, and substitution; although in this study only the first three are found. Moreover, the result of this research adds extra lists of taboo words translation in Asian context. There is a kind of pattern that can be drawn if we look at studies on translating swearing words in various contexts in Asia. Seen from several studies on taboo words translation in Asian context, the excessive use of censorship and euphemism are easily spotted. This might be because the culture which bound the works since they are going to be viewed by Asian spectators. Nevertheless, similar studies need to be done to gain more data to arrive to a certain hypothesis.

Considering the purpose of translation, this act of censorship needs to be re-examined. Translators cannot delete a word or a phrase just because the word is not accepted in the target language culture. This act should be done under a wise decision. When the words or phrases related to swearing words that are not accepted in the target language, the translator needs to see the function of the words or phrases. If they do not serve an important function, meaning if they are deleted there will not be a price to pay, then they can be deleted. However, if the words have a specific function, such as serving as a tool of characterization, then they should be translated.

## Conclusion

From the analysis done, it can be concluded that the swearing words appeared in movie "Suicide Squad" are not accurately translated into its Indonesian subtitle. This results in the distortion of the characters depiction. The swearing words were used in the movie to convey some message, one of which is carrying the characteristics of villains in the US. The second

function of the swearing words is to give a contrastive effect to the portrayal of the characters; in one hand, they are villains who usually use bad words, in the other hand, they sacrifice their life to protect other people, the nation which put them in prison.

The functions above cannot be found in the Indonesian version of the subtitle. Some swearing words are softened or even deleted. As a result, the villain characters are not as 'thick' as the original version. Furthermore, the contrastive effect aimed in the original version is not achieved in the Indonesian version. Thus, the decision to soften or delete the swearing words might lead to the misconstruction of the character representation in a translated version of a text.

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